Rainbow (l to r): Tony Carey, Jimmy Bain, Cozy Powell, Ronnie Dio, Ritchie Blackmore and £40,000 worth of fairyland. *Pic: FIN COSTELLO.*

Meanwhile on Merseyside they're

RABID FOR RAINBOW

Blackmore's Rainbow

LIVERPOOL

In the lobby of the Liverpool Holiday Inn, a dapper, black-clad figure stands unobtrusively among the chesterfields.

Offstage, Ritchie Blackmore gives little sign of his power to move audiences. Only his sharp-eyed glances betray any restlessness.

Ritchie has something on his mind, though there's little flicker of emotion when he talks.

"They're trying hard to get the tour stopped," he says. "The halls are phoning other halls, and asking them whether they're getting Rainbow. They're telling them what's happened."

Three dates into the British debut tour of Blackmore's band, Rainbow, and "What's happened" is that the act is prov-ing a little too successful.

The problem is what's referred to as "the wreckers" — kids inspired enough by the music to take a chunk or two out of their surroundings.

"It's flattering in a way," says Ritchie. "But if it goes over . . . We'll have to cool it, tonight."

In the event, attempts to cool it notwithstanding, the damage at the Liverpool Empire is estimated at £2,000.

Rainbow bass player Jimmy Bain is asked to talk about the audience reaction. He's hard put to restrain an exuberant grin, and can't decide between "Beatlemania" and "a football crowd" as descriptions of the fans' response.

Neither is quite accurate. A better comparison would be the British reaction to Bill Haley in the '50s. It's as though a new generation is discovering the crazed spirit of rockanroll all over again, but from a source with a hundred times the energy. Rainbow are clearly a very hot act indeed.

Despite talk after the show of girls crushed up against the stage, the Rainbow audience is mainly young blokes — 17 and under. And even before the band come on, the guys have worked themselves up to Roman Circus pitch.

There's much swaggering swigging of beer cans, and impatient growls of "Ritchie."

When the house-lights dim a giant roar goes up, and it intensifies when Blackmore walks on, even though he's no more than a vague outline on the darkened stage.

The soundtrack of *The Wizard Of Oz* blast over the PA, and the band give forth with a few bars of "Over the Rainbow", before powering their way into "Kill the King".

The style is initially familiar enough. Heavy metal riffs and shrill vocals. but it becomes clear there's enough variation of pace and mood to substantiate Blackmore's claim to a more melodic approach.

Right from the start, though, he's pouring out those high-speed high-intensity sounds. His guitar sings lyrically, screams abusively, and gibbers madly, all at a volume some notches above the pain threshold. Half the kids in sight are out of their seats miming to imaginary axes like a battalion of junior Joe Cockers.

Driving the band along is Cozy Powell, the man with a thousand arms, flailing manically at drums which are built like an artillery emplacement.

On walks Mr Ronnie Dio, the man with a voice fierce enough to wilt a Plant. Ronnie spends half the night walking on and off to make way for the soloists, and you begin to wonder what he does out there. Maybe he's got a part-time job.

Looming over the whole thing is what's referred to as the sixth member of the band — the electronic rainbow which Ritchie had built in New York at a cost of £40,000.

Great bursts of colour flood across it, changing pace, shape, direction, and tone with the music. The ultimate, perhaps, in rock light shows, it's a stunning spectacle on its own account.

"You look out into the audience," says Jimmy Bain, "and whole sections aren't looking at the band, they're mesmerised by the rainbow."

All that technology onstage takes a road crew of 17 men seven hours to assemble. Half measures are clearly out, and so too are immediate profits.

By the band's second number, the audience are clapping solidly to the beat. The song is "Mistreated", one of Blackmore's finest, and he states the theme with surprising gentility before the band crash into that classic riff, as hard-edged as they come.

A rap from Dio about the inevitable virtues of Liverpool leads into "Sixteenth Century Greensleeves", which nods in the direction of medieval music, without sacrificing a watt of 20th Century energy.

"Catch The Rainbow" finds Dio clawing the air in a way that recalls Rod Hull and Emu. The song is the band's "Stairway To Heaven" — a delicate, tasteful ballad that climaxes with a biting solo from Ritchie.

It's during "Man On The Silver Mountain", which follows, that Blackmore digs his guitar into his crotch, and proceeds to toss off the guitar's neck — the first of many such gestures which make the kids froth.

"Stargazer", the anthem from "Rainbow Rising", begins with an inventive keyboards workout from Tony Carey, before the band rampages onto that majestic melody.

As far as the audience is concerned, so far, so rapturous. But their ecstacy goes into overdrive with "Still I'm Sad", which features Cozy's drum solo.

One kid, aged perhaps 15, six foot six and thin as a rake, proceeds to perform his own drum solo upon the conveniently placed skull of a smaller friend.

As for Cozy, he makes Ginger Baker look like Hilda Baker, with a solo that's fast, furious, frenzied.

And if you thought that Cozy's nearest musical neighbours were the cannons from the "1812 Overture", then maybe so did he. Midway through the solo, that very chunk of Tchaikovsky rips from the PA, with bells ringing, cannons firing, and Cozy battling away like Napoleon's entire army. A moment to treasure.

Rainbow keeps the kids waiting a good five minutes for the encore, "Do You Close Your Eyes", with the applause building up all the while. Then the final climax, the ritual guitar- smashing, and there's enough adrenalin flowing round the hall to end the drought.

The message is clear: Rainbow have risen.

Bob Edmands